

**ISSUE BRIEF:
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND HOMELESSNESS IN KING
COUNTY**

BY

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In 2005, well over 15,000 individual requests for shelter from victims of domestic violence and their children in the Seattle-King County area were turned away. While these requests are duplicated among the different domestic violence shelter programs, they represent desperate attempts to find a safe place to go. How can we as a community help these women find a safe place to go—not just during the peak of a crisis, but permanently?

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the needs of women and their children who are not only victimized by domestic violence but who also become homeless because of domestic violence. **As plans are made in our community to implement the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, an intentional eye must be cast on the plight of domestic violence victims who need more than immediate safety in order to avoid the cycle of homelessness.**

This document provides an overview of the connection between domestic violence and homelessness and the traditionally distinct division between the domestic violence and the homeless service systems within King County. In addition, it examines the dynamics of when domestic violence and poverty intersect. It concludes with recommendations for how the domestic violence and homeless systems can coordinate efforts to keep survivors of domestic violence safe and housed.

Domestic Violence and Homelessness: the Connection

The National Perspective

“Domestic Violence is a leading cause of homelessness nationally.” This statement serves as the introduction to The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2006 briefing on *“The impact of the Violence Against Women Act 2005 on the housing rights and options of survivors of domestic and sexual violence.”* This comes as no surprise to those who have worked either in the field of domestic violence or in the field of homelessness.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors does an annual status report on Hunger and Homelessness in America’s cities. In cities surveyed in 2004, 44% identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness. Among cities surveyed in 2005, 50% identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness. An in-depth survey done by Homes for the Homeless and the Institute for Children and Poverty in 1997-1998, discovered that among the ten cities surveyed, 57% of homeless parents cited domestic violence as the reason for their homelessness.

A frequently-quoted research study (Browne and Bassuk, 1997, 1998) found that 92% of homeless women have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives, and that 63% have been victims of domestic violence as adults. Another study (Baker, Cook, and Norris, 2003) reported that from a sample of 110 women who had experienced domestic violence, 38% also experienced homelessness. Yet another study of low-income and homeless mothers found that 91.6% of the homeless women and 81.8% of low-income housed mothers reported physical or sexual assaults at some point in their lives. (Bassuk, et al., 1996)

The Local Perspective

On any given night, there are roughly 137 beds that are identified as available for victims of domestic violence in either confidential or non-confidential facilities. The flexibility in bed count represents the difference in family sizes and age of children. Most programs have cribs that can be moved from room to room. Many also have portable cots that can accommodate more children in larger families. Sometimes shelters have more single women than they do women with children which would decrease the bed count accordingly. Most of the shelter programs and many non-shelter domestic violence programs also have hotel vouchers.

The turnaway rates in 2005 for Seattle domestic violence shelter programs were roughly 12 to 1. King County programs outside of the City of Seattle (Domestic Abuse Women's Network in south King County and Eastside Domestic Violence Program in east King County) reported an 18 to 1 turnaway rate for 2005. Over 15,000 requests were turned away. These numbers are duplicated within some of the programs and certainly among programs because there is no single point of access. Each of the County's five emergency shelter programs serving domestic violence victims has its own crisis line. While the numbers may be duplicated, the numbers represent a high level of desperation to find safety. Conversations have started with domestic violence service providers to explore ways of consolidating the hotlines so a more accurate count may be obtained and to help alleviate the level of desperation experienced by a victim who is calling shelter after shelter, day after day.

What happens to those who are turned away? They may turn to homeless shelters and not disclose the domestic violence. They may stay in their home and pray that the abuse will stop. They may flee to family or friends. They may try to find safety on the streets. Women, especially if they have children with them, will do their best to hide: the far corner campsite of a State park; the parked car in a quiet neighborhood cul de sac. For example, one woman hid with her two-year-old twins in the family car, moving the car at regular intervals, day and night, since she knew it would have been reported stolen. She did this for two weeks while she waited for shelter space.

What happens once safe shelter space is located? The lack of affordable housing options after domestic violence emergency shelter may trap many women into a choice of continuing homelessness or returning to the abusive partner. Even with transitional housing available from both domestic violence and homeless service providers, there are more people who need housing than there are available units. It is not uncommon for a transitional housing provider to interview as many as 20 families for one unit. For example, even with the unique niche of housing chemically-dependent battered women, Eastside Domestic Violence Program routinely

turns away three families for each one who applies to My Friend's Place Supportive Housing Program.

Two Separate Systems.

While homelessness is often a direct result of domestic violence, the resources available are aligned to address only a component of the issues presented when a battered woman seeks safe shelter. Historically, battered women's safe homes and shelters were developed as a means for immediate safety from an abusive relationship. Domestic violence confidential shelters are required to prioritize those who appear to be in the greatest danger. Services are focused on safety planning and healing through the support of peers and shelter advocates. There are time constraints on providing services related to housing advocacy and search, financial management, vocational training, and employment. The normal length of stay in domestic violence shelters has been 30 days. While a recent City of Seattle policy shift now allows for ninety-day stays, the program culture and advocate experience and expertise may not be readily adapted to different responsibilities. Even if these additional service areas were incorporated into the program, there would still be challenges related to the need for battered women to focus on complex legal issues and health concerns while looking for employment and permanent housing. Even someone with job skills and employment history can face poverty and homelessness due to the relatively limited amount of time she can stay in domestic violence emergency shelters (30 to 90 days) and the limited number of transitional housing units available.

On the other hand, homeless services providers are focused on the move from emergency shelter to a more stable living environment and improving financial stability so the move can be made as quickly as possible. The homeless services providers try to screen out active domestic violence in order to preserve the safety of the facility, clients, and staff. Even with the prevalence of domestic violence survivors among its population, the safety planning necessary as the needs of survivors change is not usually addressed. With few exceptions, the general approach is that there is a neat divide between the needs of domestic violence victims and the needs of those who are homeless for all of the other reasons.

For those who are out of immediate danger, but still homeless, there is often no place to go. As indicated, few domestic violence or homeless emergency shelter programs address both the need for safety planning and financial stability with the awareness that the crisis of domestic violence will impact a woman's life and economic stability for years. The threats from an abusive partner and the trauma from past abuse will effectively sabotage efforts made toward economic stability, permanent housing, recovery, and treatment. Immigration status and disabilities increase the barriers. It is not uncommon for the abusive partner to manipulate the legal system through regular challenges to custody and visitation. One victim/survivor said when her abusive ex-partner died after many years of separation, "I'm finally free to live."

The limited definition of chronic homelessness usually does not include domestic violence as a potentially chronic condition. Yet for many, the combination of a lifelong history of physical trauma, mental illness, chemical dependency, and poverty may result in chronic homelessness. A life on the streets and in shelters tends to increase a battered woman's vulnerability to new, abusive relationships that continue her cycle of homelessness.

For domestic violence emergency shelter programs, the presence of a history of homelessness combined with mental illness and chemical dependency usually eliminates women in current abusive relationships from services. The presence of current physical danger will eliminate her from homeless emergency shelters if she discloses her fears.

The Intersection of Poverty and Domestic Violence

While domestic violence cuts across all socio-economic lines and forces many women into temporary housing (friends, family, emergency shelter), women already in poverty face far greater barriers when viable, long-term housing options are not available. “The availability of safe, affordable, and stable housing can make a critical difference in a woman’s ability to escape an abusive partner and remain safe and independent. Without viable housing options, many battered women, particularly those already living in poverty, are forced to remain in abusive relationships, accept inadequate or unsafe housing conditions, or become homeless and perhaps increase their risk of sexual and physical violence.” (Menard, 2001)

A study on domestic violence and poverty done by Jean Calterone Williams in homeless and domestic violence shelters in Arizona from 1994 to 1996 revealed that the female population in both environments looked quite similar. A pattern of persistent poverty and battering relationships was consistently described as the process experienced by women through the downward cycle of homelessness. The author goes so far as to conclude that women may “redefine their experiences in order to correspond more closely to an identity looked for by a shelter.” Sometimes the woman will try to select the type of shelter services most useful to her: the housing and employment assistance in homeless shelters or the psychological support to heal from the abusive relationship in domestic violence shelters. Viewpoints from the community are also often different. Battered women are seen as survivors and as helping themselves. Homeless women may be viewed as lazy and failing to act proactively on their own behalf.

In the end, neither type of shelter can effectively assist with the stability that would come from long-term subsidized housing and education and training for higher wage job opportunities combined with an eye to safety and healing. Services need to be coordinated in a way that integrates safety with the financial independence adequate to maintain long-term housing.

Recommendations for Coordinated Efforts

1. **Domestic violence service providers need to explore ways to centralize the initial contact point for victims of domestic violence** so shelter availability can be determined in one call and referrals to the appropriate agency can be made without numerous calls to many different phone numbers.
2. Several researchers (Davis, Correia, Menard, and Schechter) suggest that **domestic violence programs need to address the range of risks that women face throughout their life**. In order to do that, stronger relationships need to be developed between domestic violence shelter providers and homeless shelter providers. “...Finding, or creating, housing options for battered women is a critical part of safety planning, and

creating housing options requires strong community alliances.” (Amy Correia and Jen Rubin, 2001)

3. **Homeless service providers need to remember the presence of domestic violence survivors in their shelters. Training staff on the basic dynamics of domestic violence and the components of safety planning is vital.** Victims of domestic violence are not just working on financial stability. They are working on complex legal issues such as child custody, safety concerns, and lingering trauma from violence. It is difficult to adequately attend to those issues without a safe vantage point. Relationships with domestic violence providers are critical so that referrals may be made or consultations requested.
4. **Both domestic violence emergency shelter programs and homeless emergency shelter programs need to coordinate the availability of supportive services for women plagued by abuse, poverty, homelessness, chemical dependency, and mental health issues.** Susan Schechter wrote, “we want a world in which, wherever a battered woman goes, someone is prepared to help.”
5. **Prevention is key. Over half of the women in abusive relationships do not leave their home.** Instead of a societal expectation that she leave, there should be increasing efforts to remove the abusive partner (even assuring that the partner has a place to go), to help the survivor with safety measures in the home, and to assist with the emergency financial needs that the survivor will face in order to stay in the home. Since most survivors do have children, allowing the survivor to stay will alleviate the impact on children and help prevent the cycle of homelessness for her children.
6. As the King County community continues its work to end homelessness, **the needs of domestic violence victim/survivors should be recognized throughout all of the planning steps, in each of the population groups, and from the spectrum of prevention through chronic homelessness.** 15,000 requests for safe shelter are too many to turn away. Let’s hope that by 2014, not a single woman or child will be turned away. Let’s hope that wherever a battered woman goes, someone will be prepared to help.

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